

Croatia and EU enlargement: open bridge or closing door?

Blog post by Senior Associate Marijana Milic, 18 November 2019

On January 1st, Zagreb assumes the rotating presidency of the European Council. Its time at the helm will involve a number of firsts. It will be Croatia's first presidency since becoming the newest member state in 2013. It will be the first presidency responding to Ursula von der Leyen's new commission, itself entering office after a rocky start. It could be the first presidency during which an EU member state (finally) leaves the bloc. But it may also be defined by the question of the EU's potential for enlargement.

When Paris decided to veto the opening of the accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania last month, it all but explicitly signalled that the domestic politics of accession in France would trump any further debate on the question for the foreseeable future. With a clear eye on the 2022 presidential election, Macron said there is no popular support for accession, and he appears to have the tacit support of many other large EU states in doing so. Whatever state held the presidency at this point would have to deal with the minor crisis that this has produced in the western Balkans. But Zagreb is caught between Paris and its neighbours, who are looking to it to defend their accession perspective. Moreover, the decision has significant consequences for investment in the wider Balkans region.

Croatia will convene a western Balkans Summit in an attempt to repair a seriously damaged process and mitigate a clear sense of betrayal in the western Balkan capitals. But Zagreb also understands that brokering a way forward is unlikely until after the French presidential elections. Instead it is likely to focus on deploying influence in both directions.

First, it will remind the rest of the European Council that EU rejection needs to be calibrated in such a way to ensure that the western Balkan states do not seek alternative forms of patronage, or simply drift into a more insular politics. There is a risk of rising right-wing, nationalist sentiment in North Macedonia. China has invested heavily in the region over the last five years and sees potential advantage in using investment as a diplomatic tool. In practice, it is highly unlikely that either Beijing or Moscow step into the space Brussels is vacating in the short term, but there are certainly politicians in the western Balkans who see opportunity in courting alternative patrons.

Second, in the Balkans itself, Croatia will be focused on encouraging Tirana and Skopje to believe that their long-term trajectory towards the EU will not be deflected by short term politics in Paris or elsewhere. Albania is a NATO member state and North Macedonia is on its way to joining NATO while cultural, trade and economic ties to Europe remain closer than to Russia. Zagreb's argument will be that the western Balkans should continue to reform on the calculation that the door will be open in the future. In October, the leaders of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia launched a "little Schengen" agenda for market integration and free movement among themselves.

Croatia's success in making both arguments will shape the next phase of accession negotiations in the western Balkans. It depends on Croatia persuading larger member states from the west and the east to put aside considerable differences about the political and economic future of the EU. And convincing Tirana and Skopje that patience will see the bridge to the EU open again with time.

Croatia's presidency must deal with the fallout from Paris' opposition to EU enlargement. Can they be a bridge for the western Balkans to EU membership?

